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Message Text

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PAGE 01 BANGKO 14228 291038Z
ACTION EA-09

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DIA WASHDC
CINCPAC HONLOLULU

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 14228

NOFORN

FOL TEL SENT ACTION BANGKOK INFO VIENTIANE FROM UDORN DATED
29 JUNE 1977, REPEATED FOR YOUR INFO

QUOTE

C O N F I D E N T I A L NOFORN UDORN 0115

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PBOR, MCAP, TH, LA
SUBJECT: REPORT OF LPDR RIVER PATROL BOATS AT SAVANNAKHET

REF: USEAO BANGKOK 220927Z JUN 77

1. CONSULATE APPRECIATES REPORT CONTAINED REFTEL. WE WILL ATTEMPT TO MONITOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS REGARDING THIS SUBJECT IN COURSE OF OUR REGULAR CONTACTS WITH SENIOR MEKONG RIVER OPERATIONS UNIT (MROU) OFFICERS AND RTG SECURITY OFFICIALS IN NORTHEAST.

2. IN INTERIM WE OFFER FOLLOWING OBSERVATIONS WHICH MAY BE USEFUL TO MISSION IN ASSESSING SITUATION:

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(A) RTN BOAT ASSETS ON MEKONG RIVER, BASED ON SEVERAL MROU BRIEFINGS WE HAVE RECEIVED, LATEST BEING IN DECEMBER 1976, INCLUDE: 30 RIVER PATROL BOATS (PBR), 3 RIVER PATROL CRAFT (RPC), AND 60 SMALL (14-16 FT) ASSAULT BOATS. MAINSTAY OF MROU FORCE ARE 32-FOOT, FIBERGLASS, US-BUILT PBR'S WHICH ARE POWERED BY INTAKE PUMP-JET STEAM PROPULSION SYSTEMS AND ARE NORMALLY ARMED WITH TWIN .50 CAL MACHINE GUNS FORWARD AND HAVE A GUN MOUNT AFT

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CAPABLE OF HOLDING 60 MM MORTAR, .50 CAL OR M-60 MACHINE GUN OR AUTOMATIC 40 MM GRENADE LAUNCHER. (ACCORDING TO OUR INFORMATION 81 MM MORTARS ARE USUALLY MOUNTED ON PATROL CRAFT FAST (PCF) RATHER THAN PBR'S WHICH ARE NOT BIG ENOUGH TO HANDLE THEM). MOST MROU PBR'S ARE ALSO EQUIPPED WITH RADAR WHICH, IF FUNCTIONING PROPERLY, CONSIDERABLY ENHANCES THEIR NIGHTIME OPERATING CAPABILITIES.

(B) MROU CAN ALSO CALL ON SUPPORT OF ESTIMATED 10-15 MARINE POLICE PATROL LAUNCHES ARMED WITH LIGHT MACHINE GUNS AS WELL AS SCORE OR SO OF SMALL, SWIFT SCOUT BOATS POWERED BY OUTBOARD MOTORS AND CAPABLE OF TRANSPORTING 3-4 ARMED MEN WITH PORTABLE RADIOS. IN ADDITION, RTAF ASSETS IN NAKHON PHANOM, UBON, AND UDORN, WHICH INCLUDE ONE T-28 SQUADRON EACH DEPLOYED AT LATTER TWO BASES AND TOTAL OF APPROXIMATELY DOZEN RTA GUNSHIPS STATIONED AT UDORN, SAKHON NAKHON, NAKHON PHANOM, AND UBON, PROVIDE MROU WITH IMPORTANT TACTICAL AIR SUPPORT. SUCH SUPPORT IS GENERALLY REGARDED AS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF EFFECTIVE RIVERING PATROL OPERATIONS.

(C) MROU BRIEFINGS DESCRIBED LPDR RIVER PATROL CAPABILITY IN DECEMBER AS VERY LIMITED, CONSISTING PRIMARILY OF ESTIMATED 15-20 STEEL-HULLED, SLOW, PATROL CRAFT, RELIVS OF FRENCH ERA. THESE SOURCES NOTED THAT, BASED ON THEIR LATEST INFORMATION, ONLY FOUR OR FIVE OF THESE CRAFT APPEARED TO BE OPERATIONAL. TO BEST OF OUR KNOWLEDGE LPDR DOES NOT AT THIS TIME POSSESS TACTICAL AIR CAPABILITY AVAILABLE TO RTG FORCES PATROLLING MEKONG.
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(D) BASED ON EXPERIENCE OF CONOFF WHO SPENT TWO YEARS AS NAVAL OFFICER WITH US RIVERINE FORCES IN VIETNAM, WE RAISE QUESTION WHETHER RTN CONCERN, REPORTED REFTEL, THAT LPDR PLANS TO ARM US-BUILT PBR'S WITH 75 MM RECOILESS RIFLE IS WELL FOUNDED. CONOFF DOUBTS THAT A 75 MM RECOILESS RIFLE COULD BE SUITABLY MOUNTED ON A US-TYPE PBR BECAUSE OF WEAPON'S LETHAL BACKBLAST WHICH WOULD POSE SAFETY HAZARD TO CREW AND CRAFT'S SUPERSTRUCTURE. CONOFF ADDS THAT TO BEST OF HIS RECOLLECTION US PBR'S IN VIETNAM WERE NEVER OUTFITTED WITH THIS TYPE OF WEAPON.

3. IN LIGHT OF ABOVE IT SEEMS TO US THAT MROU, SUPPORTED BY MARINE POLICE AND RTAF AND RTA AIR ASSETS, IS TODAY AND IS LIKELY TO REMAIN AT LEAST FOR NEAR FUTURE CLEARLY DOMINANT MILITARY FORCE ON MEKONG RIVER. EVEN ALLOWING FOR SUCH FACTORS AS CONSTANT MAINTENANCE PROBLEMS WITH PBR RADAR EQUIPMENT, LIMITED SPEED OF MARINSJPOLICE PATROL LAUNCHES, AND NEED FOR IMPROVING OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES BETWEEN MROU AND ITS TACTICAL AIR SUPPORT, ALL OF WHICH MAKE MROU SOMEWHAT LESS EFFECTIVE THAN IT MAY APPEAR ON PAPER, RTG FORCES HOLD DECISIVE EDGE OVER LPDR COUNTERPARTS.

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4. ADMITTEDLY, LPDR INTRODUCTION OF FOURTEEN US-TYPE PBR'S, AS REPORTED REFTEL, PROVIDES LPDR FOR FIRST TIME WITH POTENTIAL TO ESTABLISH A LIMITED MILITARY PRESENCE ON MEKONG RIVER. HOWEVER, IT WILL PROBABLY REQUIRE A CONSIDERABLE AMOUNT OF TIME FOR LPDR TO TRAIN EFFECTIVE BOAT CREWS AND DEVELOP A LOGISTICAL REPAIR AND SUPPLY SYSTEM TO MATCH THAT OF RTG, (THIS IS ASSUMING THAT LPDR, RATHER THAN SRV, PERSONNEL ARE OPERATING PATROL XORCE). EVEN MORE IMPORTANTLY, LPDR IS UNLIKELY TO DEVELOP IN NEAR FUTURE TACTICAL AIR CAPABILITY NECESSARY FOR ITS FLEDGLING RIVER PATROL FORCE TO POSE MEANINGFUL CHALLENGE TO MROU.

5. AT SAME TIME, WE WOULD NOTE THAT APPEARANCE OF NEW LPDR PATROL CRAFT ON MEKONG RIVER MAY POSE HAZARD TO IMPROVED BORDER RELATIONS BETWEEN THAILAND AND LAOS IN NORTHEAST.
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PRESENCE OF LPDR CRAFT WOULD SEEM TO INCREASE POTENTIAL FOR SERIOUS CLASH BETWEEN LPDR AND RTG SECURITY FORCES ALONG MEKONG. PREVIOUSLY, SUCH CLASHES HAVE CONSISTED LARGELY OF EXCHANGE OF GUNFIRE BETWEEN MROU PATROL BOATS AND LPDR SOLDIERS OR MILITIA STATIONED ON LAO BANK. NOW POSSIBILITY EXISTS FOR VIOLENT ENCOUNTERS ON MEKONG BETWEEN PATROL BOATS OF TWO COUNTRIES WHICH CAN MORE EASILY ESCALATE INTO A SERIOUS CONFRONTATION. AT MINI MUM, MROU COMMANDERS, AS INDICATED REFTEL, MAY FIND IT DIFFICULT TO ADJUST TO PRESENCE, ALBEIT SMALL, OF THEIR LAO ADVERSARIES ON WATERS THAT MROU HAS HERETOFORE PATROLLED PRACTICALLY UNOPPOSED. IT WILL REQUIRE A COMBINATION OF COOL THINKING AND CLOSE CONTROL BY CINC RTN IN BANGKOK TO RESTRAIN MROU FROM OVERREACTING TO NEW SITUATION AND TO INSURE THAT IT CONDUCTS ITS PATROL ACTIVITIES IN RESPONSIBLE MANNER.
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